

**RHETORIC AND REFORM:  
FEMINISM AMONG INDIAN MUSLIMS,  
1900 - 1940**

*Ayesha Khan*



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## PREFACE

This essay on Muslim women reformers and their rhetoric prior to 1940 is a preliminary look at the major issues that shaped the early efforts to redress gender imbalances in South Asia. The writings and the rhetoric of four well-known figures from the Muslim elite form the material for analysis; and from their words we realize that the restrictive practice of *purdah* (segregation of the sexes) and lack of female education were the pressing issues of the time for these reformers. And in struggling to find ways out of the oppression they experienced, each of the four women developed their own relationship with Islam based on their interpretations of its teachings.

The urgency of these women's quests to create a better life for Muslim women as well as the ideological and religious dilemmas with which they struggled are disturbingly familiar to us in Pakistan today. Not only the activist women's movement, but all national efforts to improve the social indicators of women as well, are faced with the same set of obstacles. Pakistani women today are still predominantly illiterate; they are still immobilized by the crushing pressure of *purdah* norms which cripple their access to schools, jobs, and even health clinics. And most of all, the fact that we inhabit an ideological nation-state has complicated and politicized our ability to debate questions of Islamic teachings, particularly those which pertain to women.

Caught as we are in a trap of politics, ideology,

and unequal human development, we rarely have the time or space to examine our own history in order to trace patterns and learn lessons from the struggles for freedom that have been fought by women in South Asia over the centuries. The research for the following essay, which was my Master's thesis at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and as such a very introductory foray, was nonetheless a fascinating and enlightening task. It taught me that Muslim women had been vocal on the problems that still plague us, and had expressed more creative and diverse views on Islam than many of us are willing to do today.

The natural question that arises from these findings is: to what extent did the politics of Muslim India, resulting in the state of Pakistan, muzzle the voices of women and put a lid on challenging traditional interpretations of Islam? The answer to that question will be most elegantly proven if we use what we know of the history of women's reformism as it preceded the politics of a separate Muslim State.

Another invaluable lesson to be learnt from a historical perspective on Muslim women's activism in the region is the need to use the term feminism with humility and without condescension regarding the struggles of the women who came before us. If we wish to understand how feminism, as an intellectual activity engaged in challenging patriarchy, evolved in our own cultural and political context, then the work of elite Muslim women at the turn of the century becomes a vital contribution to this process.

Ayesha Khan  
Islamabad, January 1999.



## INTRODUCTION

In 1927 the American journalist Katherine Mayo published her controversial indictment of Indian society. *Mother India*, as it was sarcastically entitled, proved to be a simplistic critique designed to justify British rule by making frequently accurate observations of the social oppression perpetuated by Indians against each other:

Thus arises a curious picture, (she wrote) - the picture of a man who has since time immemorial enslaved his wife, and whose most vital need in all life, present and to come, is the getting of a son... . He has thought it good that she be kept ignorant; that she forever suppress her natural spirit and inclinations, walking ceremonially, in stiff harness, before him, her 'earthly' god. She has so walked, obedient from infancy to death, through untold centuries of merciless discipline, while he, from infancy to death, through untold centuries, has given himself no discipline at all.<sup>1</sup>

Educated Indians were incensed by her crude description of their society. Western critiques such as these were supposed to have mobilized social reformers and nationalist politicians into proving that Indians, far from being mired in their vices, were fit to govern themselves according to the humanitarian principles so earnestly upheld by the British.

Muslims, however, considered themselves free from most of the sins that Mayo and Indian social reformers were intent on exposing. Child marriage,

suttee, infanticide, illiteracy, were all supposed to be problems unique to Hindu society. And as for polygamy and *purdah*, the religious sanction of these practices helped to justify turning a blind eye to their abuse. Nevertheless, women's education had already become an issue for those Muslims who sought the uplift of their community, and who realized the role women's issues could play in mobilizing Indian Muslims to create a new identity for themselves.

Muslim social reformers soon included the wives and daughters of prominent educationalists and politicians. During the height of the nationalist movement, the political affiliations of these women reflected the divisions among Muslim politicians themselves. The process of mass mobilization of women began when the Women's Sub-Committee of the Muslim League was formed in 1938. Muslim League's ideology, the inspiring leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, and the effort of prominent women activists were all credited with making ordinary men and women into ardent nationalists. Issues of social, in particular women's, reform were raised and dropped as part of the greater political game.<sup>2</sup> This marked the height of the impasse in which Muslim women reformists had found themselves since the beginning of the century. That is, their feminism relied on external social or political justifications to validate issues which had a life of their own.

As early as 1940, women who had always been active at the highest level of society, and who had always viewed women's problems from their position of privilege, revealed how limited their perspective really was. For example, Begum Shah Nawaz, a prominent Punjabi reformist and politician, described the lot of the average Indian woman in these words:

Picture to yourself the dark pools of ignorance and



superstition in which the lives of the majority of them are being spent. Steeped in rusty old customs, drowned in a sea of ignorance, chained to centuries-old inhibitions, living in an atmosphere of constant fear - fear of nature and fear of man.<sup>3</sup>

Begum Shah Nawaz operated from an anti-colonial platform, and she was striving for a new, autonomous, political order for Indian Muslims. But why was the rhetoric she employed to describe the oppression of her own women so much like that of Katherine Mayo quoted above?

The exaggeration and exoticism in Begum Shah Nawaz's description remind us of Mayo's orientalism because they too were a function of power. In the Begum's case, her discourse was a product of her elite class status. It allowed her the freedom and the distance to be patronizing. Most importantly, at the same time that it created her awareness of women's issues, it limited her understanding of them as well.

In the following discussion I will use the rhetoric of early Muslim women reformers to explain why they arrived at the impasse exemplified by the above comparison between Mayo and Shah Nawaz. I will first provide a historical background in support of women's issues among Indian Muslims. Then the rhetoric of four reformers, active between 1900 and 1940, will be used to present their positions on two pressing issues: *purdah* and women's education. Through their own words we will come to see how class, Islam, and the Muslim quest for a new political identity helped to set their individual agendas for reform. Finally, the dilemmas they articulated will be discussed in relation to the issues confronting other feminisms in the Muslim world.

## CHAPTER I

### Indian Muslims and Women's Issues – A Historical Background.

No doubt awareness of women's problems in Muslim society was partially a response to the colonial challenge. In this sense, Syed Ahmed Khan's Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh was both an acknowledgement of the western contribution to philosophy and the sciences, as well as a practical method of winning government patronage for Muslims in the United Provinces.<sup>4</sup> Mayo-style critiques of Hindu and Muslim customs were not uncommon. Those Muslims who did not brush them aside tended to feel embarrassed, and sometimes went to the extreme of forcing their reluctant wives out of *purdah* and into mixed society. The desire to educate upper-class women was partly a hunger for social prestige, although Syed Ahmed Khan himself displayed no interest in the issue. However, Muslims at Aligarh soon realized that they had to come to terms with the popular British refrain that the progress of a society can be judged from the status of its women.

Tapan Raychaudhuri's observations of 19th century Hindu Bengali nationalists warn us against explaining too much in terms of a need to emulate the dominant, alien civilization. The spirit of cultural re-



assertion which characterized early nationalist movements tempered people's enthusiasm for the colonialists' culture and permitted them to see it critically. Hence, early nationalism was a mix of "informed delight in past glory", acceptance of colonial rule (with certain reforms), and re-assertion of a threatened cultural identity which, far from needing revival, was alive in all but the most westernized men.<sup>5</sup>

Early Muslim nationalism was filled with similar ambiguities, and women often helped to smooth them out. Efforts to accord women their due "dignity and status" in society functioned variably as a response to western influence, and as a symbol of pride in Islamic heritage. For example, from the perspective of certain Muslims at Aligarh and elsewhere, child marriage, *purdah* restrictions, and illiterate women were not only privately unacceptable, but a hindrance to the development of Muslims into a cohesive, progressive community.<sup>6</sup> The Muhammedan Educational Conference opened a women's section before the turn of the century as part of the Aligarh project to spread modern education among Muslims, and also "in response to the growing desire of western-educated Muslims to find educated wives."<sup>7</sup>

The educationalists at Aligarh encouraged their wives and their prominent women to found the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam in 1914. It was the first independent Muslim women's organization of its kind in India. The Anjuman's educated, upper-class leadership first wanted to promote female literacy, increase legal protection of women, and alleviate some of the excesses of *purdah* restrictions. They realized that these problems were common to all Indian women, and that their solution required co-operation between communities.<sup>8</sup>

There was a twofold understanding of women's issues in the Anjuman. First, they were seen as an



impediment to the progress of Muslim society as a whole. If the teachings of Islam were correctly followed, they would provide the ideal legal and social conditions for women.<sup>9</sup> On a second level, the reasons behind the deep rooted social reform movements, shared with Hindu women activists in the early 19th century ran thus: "women must not be ill-treated and must be given some dignity and status, because they are the custodians of the family."<sup>10</sup> Anjuman women failed to address if there was an inherent contradiction between justifying their cause as part of general Muslim "uplift", and the consequences that women's uplift held for the role of women in an established male structure.<sup>11</sup>

The project of Muslim "uplift" continued as it had even before the Anjuman was founded. As the landed, loyalist Aligarh stalwarts lost their grip on Muslim politics in North India to the young professionals located at the College, Muslims began to agitate for more reforms and re-organize themselves. Pan-Islamism temporarily united these young men with the *ulema* during the Khilafat Movement.<sup>12</sup>

The Khilafat Movement was the point in the development of Muslim political identity where mass mobilization first took place. The symbolic value of women became vital to the success of the movement. Paul Brass gives us a way to analyze this in his work on Muslim separatism in North India. He discusses the importance of cultural and historical symbols that appeal to a community's sentiments. Ultimately, the process of myth-making plays a powerful role in realizing the aims of a nationalist movement. People need to be mobilized around a symbol with which they can identify. Elite groups in turn take the lead in promoting communal identity, although their success beyond that depends upon their skills of political organization.<sup>13</sup>



Pan-Islamism was the symbol which lay at the heart of the Khilafat Movement. The political participation of women soon became desirable and religiously justifiable. Women responded well to the Ali brothers, who led the movement, and appealed to the public for support. Their decision to go public was a sign of their ability to sacrifice personal happiness in order to protect all that was sacred and good to the Muslim *ummah*. The act was a symbol of devotion to Islam and the greater family of Muslims. It was not perceived as a dangerous indication that women were entering the public arena out of zeal for western-style freedom.

At the height of Muslim nationalism during the 1940's, women active in the Muslim League dedicated their efforts at drawing support from a sheltered female public. Any agenda of women's issue was without question second in importance to the greater ideological and political aims of the Pakistan Movement. Even today, Pakistani historians pay scant attention to the connection between women's leadership in the League and their earlier work for women's social and legal reform. It is considered enough to mention women's participation in Muslim politics simply to remind us that women, too, made their sacrifices in service of a cause greater than themselves.<sup>14</sup>

From the Khilafat to the Pakistan Movement, Islam was the key symbol in the process of myth-making which developed feelings of communal identity among Muslims. The slogan 'Islam in danger', which mobilized the Muslim masses to political action, meant many things at once. It challenged the ordinary person's devotion to Islam. As a good Muslim, each man was obligated to defend his religion by supporting the League. Defence of Islam was tied to defence of its honour. The locus of honour in Islam were its women. As in the Khilafat era, women became symbols of all that



was sacred to the Muslim *ummah*. This enhanced their primary symbolic function as mothers and sisters. The end result was that the process of political mobilization drew women into its complex of symbols by completely side-tracking real problems of women's reform which had originally inspired many of them to public action.

Jinnah is not commonly seen as an exploiter of women's issues. However, his reliance on Islamic symbolism was only one of the ways in which his political tactics undermined women's issues. The fact that Jinnah kept his sister by his side in public and called for women's entry into the League in 1938 made it clear that he needed their powers of mass mobilization. Beyond that, he is even credited with taking seriously the women who shared his political platform. In the democracy he envisaged, women and all citizens would be guaranteed their rights according to humanitarian principles. But, not surprisingly, short-term political goals proved more important than these ideals.

In a bid to destabilize the Punjabi Unionist government, Jinnah exploited women's support for the Shariah laws of inheritance. Women inherited no agricultural land under customary law, so for them Islamic law was liberating. Jinnah eventually made use of the Shariat as a symbol of commitment to the Muslim community by pushing the 1937 Shariat Application Act. By this time he had compromised with the Unionists in order to win support from the landed classes in the Punjab. As a result, when the Act was put into practice, it did not legislate on the inheritance of agricultural land. The Unionists were pacified and Punjabi women activists felt betrayed. Muslim women would have to wait until the 1948 West Punjab Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act was passed amidst much rhetoric of Islamic solidarity before they



were given their inheritance rights.<sup>15</sup>

Women leaders such as Begum Shah Nawaz, Begum Tassaduq Hussain, and Begum Shaista Ikramullah unwittingly cooperated in the Muslim League's manipulation of women's issues. Muslim nationalism became their priority. They had full faith in Jinnah's ability to deal with pressing legal and educational issues once Muslim political demands were realized.<sup>16</sup> Although a few women entered government organizations, and some even ran them, a great majority of women were disappointed. This was less the fault of ungrateful politicians than it was due to the high investment of Muslim leaders, both men and women, in the socio-economic status quo. It prevented women of high positions from uniting with other women across class on the basis of an issue which affected them all; instead they stuck with reformist projects. That is, from a position of social privilege and political power, they worked towards an alleviation of women's oppression by lobbying for legal reform, opening schools and themselves breaking out of *purdah*. Indeed, it was the most they could do without challenging their men, or the politics of their class. As a result, the upper crust of Muslim women gained education and mobility in the public sphere. After almost a century of such reformism, today still less than one quarter of Pakistani women are literate. The "dark pools of ignorance and superstition" that Begum Shah Nawaz decried to a political gathering of women in 1940 are almost as mystified and misunderstood by the educated elite now as they were fifty years ago.

This brief discussion of women's issues in the context of Muslim nationalism has revealed that Islamic symbolism, and the greater cause of Muslim "uplift", were used to justify women's political participation when it was required. Their support was exploited for

reforms when it was politically expedient to do so. We have also seen that women leaders displayed a primary allegiance to the politics of their class, and not to issues of women's reform.

Historians have tried to understand why women's movements in India took this course by analyzing in great depth their relationship to nationalism or by focusing on their symbolic function. For example, the Muslim women's movement and the role it played in furthering the aims of Muslim nationalism does not differ profoundly from its All-India counterpart. Vijay Agnew notes that elite Indian women were praised when "the primary focus of their activity was the nationalist movement and not the women's cause."<sup>17</sup> She goes on to claim that the women's movement was not a feminist movement because the women "accepted the existing pattern of sex-structured roles but attempted to elevate their status within this framework."<sup>18</sup> They wanted to broaden their sphere of activity by raising social issues, but the core of the system remained unchallenged by any demand for equality.

The desire of elite women to broaden their sphere of activity is more fully developed by Gail Minault in her analysis of Muslim women's use of their own power as religious and political symbols. She explains their reformism as a way for elite women to stretch their domestic roles. In an "extended family" structure, Bi Amman, mother of the Ali brothers, was already a symbol of familial devotion. As her political activism increased, she became "mother" to the whole community. Likewise, Anjuman or Muslim League women stated that they were working for the uplift of their "sisters". The "family" was India's Muslims, although there were Muslim women who did not join the



separatist movement, and were active within the All-India Women's Conference instead.<sup>19</sup>

One benefit of the "extended family" theory is that it helps to explain why initially *purdah* was not really challenged. The entire premise of women's activism was the inviolability of separate worlds for the two sexes. Within these segregated spheres, and according to the gender roles ascribed to women, they sought a new flexibility rather than a dismantling of the social order. This logic permitted them to organize themselves, and pressure for greater legal protection for women. For example, the Sarda Act of 1930 limited the age of consent to fourteen for girls. It was supported by Jinnah, Nehru and moderate Muslims, who felt it was not an infringement upon the Shariah.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately implementation of the Act was a failure. Nevertheless, since the first decade of the twentieth century, Muslim women of the educated classes had begun to demand that their efforts to expand their "separate" sphere of permissible activity be legally protected and socially sanctioned. As we have begun to see, women relied upon the powerful symbol of Islam to legitimate their activism to themselves and to their men.

## CHAPTER II

### Biographical Background of Four Women Reformers

The Muslim women's movement never began as a cohesive group effort in India, and still has not developed into one. Its achievements were largely the result of exceptional individual dedication. However, contemporary historians insist on categorizing these women as belonging to one of two groups: social reformers or nationalists. This is unhelpful not only because it imposes a unity upon these women which did not exist, but also because it assumes a distinction between two groups which itself is questionable.

Gail Minault, for example, divides the elite activists into two groups. One consists of women who worked in social organizations, and the other is composed of women who held politics as a priority.<sup>21</sup> However, her own work on the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam, as well as the research of Forbes and Agnew on the Indian women's movement, all reveal that nationalist politics had a profound influence on the long-term survival of women's organizations. They were trapped in a cycle of political manoeuvres. These began with attempts by educated Indians to regain a foothold of power in the colonial system, and inspired early social reformism. Then, by the time women began articulating



their own demands for legal and social reform after the turn of the century, these issues had developed into symbols of powerful religious, communal, and nationalist identity. As the struggle to wrest power away from the colonialists pitted Hindus and Muslims against each other, and against themselves, women's issues were manipulated as symbols to rally political support. Thus the process came full circle.

All Muslim women activists were part of this process to some extent. They may be categorized in terms of which platform, social or political, was a priority, but that does not establish much historical significance. Even Minault concedes that women in both her categories shared the same long-term goals of civil and political rights for all.<sup>22</sup> It is more useful for our purposes to begin by distinguishing a few major figures among Muslim women, and then to explore through their statements where their ideological themes overlapped and diverged. Although theirs was not a rhetoric which wielded enough power to determine the political future of India, it contributes much to our historical understanding of how Muslim women interpreted their own lives in the hope of changing them.

The earliest reformer we will be looking at is Sultan Jahan, Begum of Bhopal (died 1930). The princely state she governed was ruled by the women in her family for generations. The Begum was neither a social reformer nor a nationalist because she actually governed her own state. Naturally, her political power relied heavily on co-operation with the British, but her activities carried little of the antagonism inherent in any struggle for more power.

The Begum was a great educationalist. Long before she began to fund Indian women's organizations, she had opened numerous schools for girls in her own



state. She felt most strongly for the cause of female education, and in conjunction with it, she supported the institution of *purdah*. For her, education and *purdah* were issues to be dealt with in the context of Islamic values. This approach was perhaps the Begum's greatest legacy for reformers in the next few generations.<sup>23</sup>

The Begum opened many girls' schools in Bhopal, and funded the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam from 1914 until just before her death. When the Anjuman's incompetence prompted the Begum to finally withdraw her funding, the organization collapsed. The All-India Women's Conference proved to be a more dedicated platform, and more representative of women across India. The Begum joined and presided over its Delhi meeting in 1928. She also wrote her own memoirs, published one book on the necessity of *purdah*, another on the ideal Muslim home, and delivered numerous speeches to promote her cause. The Begum's activities span the first generation of women organizing themselves. The Anjuman women shifted their allegiances to either the more politically radical Khilafat Movement, or to the AIWC during her lifetime.

When the Central Khilafat Committee's Women's Branch was founded in 1921, it was led by women who had entered the public arena for overtly political purposes. Shaukat and Mohamed Ali, the brothers who provided much of the Khilafat Movement's leadership, had been actively assisted by their mother from the days of their earliest attempts at consciousness-raising among Indian Muslims. Bi Amman, as she was popularly known, began appealing to the public for moral and financial support in 1913, when the Anjuman-e-Khuddam-Ka'aba was formed. Its purpose was the maintenance and defence of Islam's holy places against non-Muslim aggression.<sup>24</sup> It was supposed to be strictly non-political, but the "defence of Islam" theme



eventually became the main symbol of the Khilafat movement and the Muslim League mobilization years later.

In 1917 Bi Amman had another pressing reason to go public. She was lobbying for the release of her sons and Annie Besant from imprisonment by the government. Devotion to Islam became mixed with anti-British sentiments on a nationalist platform which she shared with Besant and Sarojini Naidu. The drama of the long-suffering mother reached a climax when she chaired the annual Muslim League meeting in place of her son. His picture graced the chair where he should have sat, while Bi Amman possibly became the first Muslim woman in India to address a mixed political gathering.<sup>25</sup>

Bi Amman was one of a group of women who toured from city to city during the Khilafat movement. Begum Hasrat Mohani, Begum Mohamed Ali, and others joined in her appeals to women to take up their responsibility to defend Islam. During the short-lived Hindu-Muslim unity which joined the Khilafat Movement with Gandhi's Non-cooperation Campaign, Bi Amman's symbolic value grew to Mother India proportions. In 1921 she presided over the All-India Ladies' Conference at the Ahmedabad Congress. As a final gesture, she lifted her *burqa* to speak at a mass meeting in the Punjab, addressing all members of the crowd as her sons and daughters.<sup>26</sup> Bi Amman died in 1924, a much loved heroine of early nationalism, and an inspiration to the awakening political consciousness of Muslim women across India.

Iqbalunnisa Hussain had made her impression upon Muslim women by 1940, when she assessed her own life and work in her book *Changing India*. She was born in Mysore and brought up in strict *purdah*. Due to the support of a liberal husband she completed her

education by receiving a bachelor's degree from a girls' college in Mysore. When one of her seven children went to England for his higher education in 1933, Iqbalunnisa left her family behind and went along with him. Upon her return a few years later, she founded the Urdu Girls' Middle School and a School of Home Industries for Muslim girls in Bangalore. She also started the Muslim Girl Guides Association.<sup>27</sup>

In the preface to her book an Englishman wrote: "Mrs. Hussain is far from being anything approaching the social reformer type. She has a charm of manner and a rich sense of humour."<sup>28</sup> The Englishman must have chosen to ignore that in addition to everything else, Iqbalunnisa was a member of the All-India Women's Conference, and represented India at the twelfth International Women's Congress held in Istanbul. Her lack of affiliation with the politics of Muslim nationalism must be in part due to the fact that in her region the influence of Aligarh, and all that followed from it, had never been as strong as in the north, where Muslim elitism and virtual numbers were much stronger. The course of her life after 1940 has not been possible to determine for the purposes of this study.

Iqbalunnisa was less a prominent social reformer of the AIWC type than a dedicated educationalist. In *Changing India* she severely criticized *purdah* and indeed Islam, as practiced in the modern world. Her ideals of progress were western-influenced, in the sense that much of her terminology is borrowed from that tradition. In comparison with the two women discussed earlier, who advocated change within a conservative interpretation of Islam, Iqbalunnisa is more moderate because she subjected even Islamic practices to, what she considered, her objective scrutiny.

The woman who exhibited some of the most extreme anger and skepticism for her time was Begum



Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Her work for female education and lifelong campaign against *purdah* have brought her fame as a pioneer among Bengali Muslim women. During her lifetime Rokeya became a public figure through her articles on women's oppression which were published regularly in the press. Later, she focussed most of her energies on running the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, opened in 1909 with money willed by her husband. In 1916 Rokeya founded the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam, Bangla, to promote female education among all classes. It appears to have had little connection with the Anjuman founded two years earlier at Aligarh. Towards the end of her life, Rokeya presided over the Bengal Women's Educational Conference, and led a session of the Indian Women's Conference held at Aligarh.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps it was her focus on Bengal and distance from Aligarh that kept her away from a nationalist platform. Rokeya stands out as a singular figure, all the more brave because she did not begin her work with the support of any organization, and continued it even after she had lost her liberal-minded husband.

Rokeya began to observe *purdah* at the age of five. She had to battle for the privilege of an education. Her brother, sister, and later her husband, all helped her to study Persian, Urdu, Bengali, and English in addition to the permitted Quranic texts. Her articles were first compiled and published as a book in 1905. The mixed reactions to her book established her as a deeply controversial writer in Bengal.<sup>30</sup> Although Rokeya was primarily an essayist, she occasionally ventured into fiction. Her short story, "Sultana's Dream" (1905), has been praised as "one of the earliest self-consciously feminist utopian stories written in English by a woman."<sup>31</sup> Still, Rokeya preferred to write in Bengali because she used the skill as "a weapon in her crusade

for reform." This reformism was a life-long commitment to raising the consciousness of her class of Bengali men and women.<sup>32</sup> It may be noted that although Rokeya devoted her life to campaigning against *purdah*, she herself never abandoned the veil, and her school also observed its restrictions.<sup>33</sup> Most probably, this was the furthest she could stretch the boundaries of convention to meet the radicalism of her stance on women's issues.

Within what can be loosely termed as an elite class of educated women, these four profiles reveal that Islam, Muslim politics, and western education had varying degrees of influence on their lives. We have also seen that each woman broke with convention, but only with the support of some members of her family. We now turn to a detailed discussion of the issues these women identified as most pressing for Muslim women in India; *purdah* and female education.



## CHAPTER III

### The Issue of *Purdah*

*Purdah* is the seclusion and segregation of women. The specifics of *purdah* observance change over time, and are affected by political, economic, social or cultural forces.<sup>33</sup> Muslims are usually blamed for having brought the institution to India. Questions of origin aside, *purdah* became entrenched in the lives of both Hindu and Muslim upper class women, and to some extent, women of the middle classes.<sup>34</sup> Mayo wrote in 1927 that over forty million women were observing some form of *purdah* in India. She added: "For every woman at the top of the scale whom western influence sets free, several humbler but prospering sisters, socially ambitious, deliberately assume the bonds."<sup>35</sup> Mayo was correct in noting the connection between *purdah* and social prestige, but as usual, reductionist in her belief that women only abandoned it under the power of western influence.

Muslim women who called for any sort of modification in strict *purdah* observance were taking a definite religious stance. For the elite among Indian Muslims, *purdah* was a Quranic injunction to be interpreted, and a symbol of honour in Islamic culture to be upheld. The religious debate arose out of these words

in the Quran:

Say to believers, that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts; that is purer for them. God is aware of the things they work. And say to the believing women, that they cast down their eyes and guard their private parts, and reveal not their adornment save such as is outward; and let them cast their veils over their bosoms, and not reveal their adornment save to their husbands or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women or what their right hands own, or such men as attend them, not having sexual desire, or children who have not yet attained knowledge of women's private parts; not let them stamp their feet, so that their hidden ornament may be known. And turn all together to God, O you believers; haply so you will prosper.<sup>36</sup>

Further Quranic injunctions were made to protect ladies from molestation in Medina when they used to relieve themselves outdoors. The veil was meant to indicate to a potential assaulter that the woman was not a commoner. It was further revealed that women should keep to their homes; and finally, that the companions of the Prophet Muhammed should make any request to his wives from behind a curtain. Out of this religious foundation grew an elaborate justification for keeping women secluded from all outside men and within the four walls of their homes. Any attempt to change this system necessitated reference to the Quran; any interpretation of its injunctions automatically placed one along the spectrum from orthodox to modernist, or beyond it to rejectionist.

Every good Muslim is obligated to protect a woman's chastity, or honour. We have already mentioned that "Islam in danger", the rallying cry during both the Khilafat and the Pakistan Movements, was also an euphemism for "our women are in danger". When Bi Amman, Fatima Jinnah, and many others



challenged Muslims to fight for Islam, they were challenging men to fight for the honour of their women as well. Therefore, it must be kept in mind when reading the following pages that from the outset a Muslim reformist had to contend with the extreme sensitivity of the question of *purdah*, on both a doctrinal and a symbolic level. There was no simple switch from Islamic culture to western values, and neither was this move desirable.

The Begum of Bhopal was a great believer in *purdah*. She even governed Bhopal while observing its restrictions. In her book *Al-Hijab or Why Purdah is Necessary* (1922) she wrote, "...*purdah* among women is a sure sign of culture and civilization in any people; and its opposite infallibly points to the reminiscence of its days of ignorance and barbarism."<sup>37</sup> (*Ibid.*, p. 124) The text is a passionate defence of *purdah* which avoids analysis of its link with class status; instead, it dwells at length upon its religious rationale. The Begum uses an Islamic justification for the institution as the base for her discussion of the ideal relationship between men and women, and the threat to society posed by western vices.

Her most detailed explanation of Islam and its teachings relevant to women is found in the slim volume entitled *Muslim Home (Part 1), A Present to the Married Couple* (1916).<sup>38</sup> In formulating her main argument, the Begum has given herself a difficult task: to prove that while Islam professes both equality between the sexes and the superiority of men at the same time, there is no real contradiction. She begins by demonstrating how Islam has put the sexes on equal moral and religious footing. The Quran reads, "... and the men and women who remember God much, God has prepared for them pardon and a great reward." (*Ibid.*, p. 2) Equality is further indicated by the fact that Islam is against polygamy in principle — hence the difficulty of its

practical implementation. It also gives women legal and social rights they never dreamt of before. (*Ibid.*, pp. 1-2)

The special regard to the weaker sex which underlines all these principles and laws makes the position of woman specially prominent. It is also remarkable that a special chapter was revealed concerning them which bears their name — the Surat u'n-Nisa. (*Muslim Home*: p. 8)

The remainder of the text highlights the legal provisions in marriage, divorce and inheritance, which have been granted to women on the basis of their equality.

The complication is consciously introduced by the Begum when she quotes the Quran as naming woman the weaker sex:

Men stand above women, for that God has graced the one of them above the other and for that they spend of their substance (for them). (*Ibid.*, p. 5)

This contradiction is not read as an inconsistency in the word of God, but as an example of reasoning beyond the bounds of our logic.

The superiority of the men as set forth in the above verse is by no means prejudicial to the equality of the sexes. Evidently such superiority is essential to the good governance of the universe. (*Ibid.*, p. 5)

This superiority will have no bearing upon a woman's legal status in Islam. And finally, by giving women the sacred trust of child-rearing, God has maintained an equilibrium between the sexes. (*Ibid.*, p. 6) The suggestion is that in return for her inferior status, woman is granted maternal responsibilities which somehow reaffirm her equality of value, if not of status.

On the strength of divine justification, the Begum goes on to elaborate upon the nature of male-female relations. As each sex has been assigned a different function in life, so has each been differently



equipped. Man's attribute is Strength. As the Maintainer, he has to face the challenges of the outside world, and so develops greater courage and intelligence than a woman. (*Al-Hijab*, p. 94) She, in contrast, is the tender Nurturer. Her development has taken a different path. The conclusion is obvious:

All that is required of men and women is to lead a clean, wholesome and pure life; and the co-operation of both sexes is necessary to gain the object in view. But as a woman has been created physically weaker compared to man; and, as besides physical inferiority, she is also weaker in intellect, so she has been enjoined to safeguard her chastity to a greater extent. (*Ibid.*, p. 93)

Woman "has been enjoined" in the same sense as she "has been granted the sacred trust of child-rearing" by God. He has made her inferior, and therefore, more vulnerable to immodesty. Now the question becomes: how will she guard her chastity?

The Begum writes that chastity is a virtue desirable in itself. If a woman is too weak to guard her own "virtue", it will be guarded by an institution. Both men and women are responsible for the maintenance of this institution, which is of no value in itself. It is a means of preserving virtue in the whole society. Men do not require such stringent seclusion for the simple reason that God has decreed they are the stronger and superior sex. (*Ibid.*, p. 93) This, in short, is the Begum's argument in favour of *purdah*.

Men are absolved of all blame for placing women into seclusion. The Begum's own rationale is too reliant upon divine injunction to allow for any skepticism about men's motivations. She describes the whole relationship between man and woman as based on love; and she concludes that man could not possibly be the enemy of woman.

By keeping them in *purdah* men have made

themselves the slaves of women, and have taken upon themselves the responsibility of supplying them with all their comforts and conveniences... barring non-appearance in public, women enjoy full rights and privileges and complete liberty. (*Ibid.*, p. 204)

The bargain between the sexes amounts to this: at marriage, the woman becomes the guardian of man's honour. (That is, she is obliged not to dishonour him in any way by her behaviour); in turn the man owes her a sum of money (*haq mehr*), and is responsible for her maintenance. The Begum writes that riches, implying the woman's value as guardian of honour, are naturally guarded under lock and key. (*Ibid.*, pp. 95-98).

Even though the Begum tries hard to prove that this system helps to maintain an equilibrium between the sexes, there is an implicit recognition that the woman might not be happy in seclusion. The above excerpts have already displayed a tone which implies that women should be grateful for what they have been given: more rights under Islam than they could have ever imagined, the trusteeship of children and chastity, a special chapter devoted to them in the Quran, and men who brave the outside world in order to protect their women's honour. In an almost defensive tone, the Begum goes on to list further reasons for *purdah*.

But woman could not look after her house so well if the injunction "abide in your houses" had not been given. She was therefore forced to subordinate her own wishes to lead a secluded life. (*Ibid.*, p. 97)

There is no explanation as to what wishes a woman may have to deny. Instead there is a swift move to save the observation from antagonizing men. "You may call it either the tyranny of man or the weakness of woman. But to call it tyranny of man will in itself be an injustice to him." (*Ibid.*, p. 97) In yet another move to anticipate women's discontent with seclusion, the



Begum admits that a woman may indeed be the best guardian of her honour, but it would still be unwise for her to abandon *purdah*. For this would be "encouraging the maniac with a shout." (*Ibid.*, p. 98) This directly contradicts her earlier argument that women's chastity needs to be closely guarded due to women's weakness; in it she did not mention any lack of control among men. There is yet another contradiction between her claim that man is not to blame for placing woman in seclusion and her praise for the abject slavery man has put himself into by *placing* woman in *purdah*.

The lack of logical coherence in her argument is partly due to the fact that her starting point is faith. Islam has made certain claims about the sexes which suggest equality and inequality at the same time. The Begum considers herself a devout Muslim before anything else. Therefore, she will justify the contradictory injunctions by commenting that "evidently such superiority is essential to the good governance and maintenance of the universe." (*Muslim Home*, p. 5) She justifies *purdah* as part of this "good governance" but cannot address any grievances women might feel. That would involve dealing with the issue on the basis of purely rational arguments. Inevitably, it leads to a dead end when common sense meets the impenetrable wall of faith. There is, however, slight room for modification without challenging religious injunction: the *burqa*, a veil covering the whole body which was invented in Turkey, became in vogue in the 1920's as a means to facilitate women's mobility outside the house. When the Begum presided over the AIWC meeting in 1928, she spoke in favour of this relaxation of *purdah* restrictions.<sup>39</sup> Just six years of organizational politics, and lobbying for the Sarda Bill (to limit the age of consent in India), had made her realize the practical advantage to expanding a woman's sphere of movement.



A second reason for the weakness in the Begum's argument for *purdah* is that she felt the need to defend Islam against the West. In *Muslim Home*, she tried to correct the false notion of Islam held in the West by showing that it advocated equality between the sexes and legislated it accordingly. In *Al-Hijab* she writes that opposition to *purdah* "does not spring from any desire to secure the much talked of educational and moral advantages of the community." It actually comes from a wish to imitate European manners and customs, because "they occupy a higher position." (*Ibid.*, p. 121) Her assertion that *purdah* "is a sure sign of culture in any people" is part of the cultural re-assertion that involved Muslim men and women alike in the search for a political identity. Western culture became antithetical to this project. Therefore, she writes that the sexes should remain equal but separate, because free intercourse between them leads "to the vortex of luxury and degradation." (*Ibid.*, p. 130) Societies which have abandoned *purdah* suffer from a moral debasement produced by dismissing natural laws. Numerous western men are quoted detailing the degradation, crime and breakup of the family unit in European societies.

The Begum's defence of *purdah* even borders on the extreme. If it were true that *purdah* were unhealthy for women, she writes, then the generational increase of weakness in women would by now have made the race extinct. (*Ibid.*, p. 190) Despite this claim, the Begum does not completely ignore the fact that *purdah* is an institution which indicates class status. She admits that the degree of *purdah* varies with social circumstance; nevertheless, the original injunctions, or reasons for it are still valid. (*Ibid.*, p. 101) The reader comes to realize that these injunctions are considered most valid for elite women, and that lower-class women have less "virtue" to guard.



Once *purdah* has been justified, there are only two issues left. First, to what extent should a woman observe *purdah* within her own home. Second, in what public affairs can she participate while still observing *purdah* etiquette? (*Ibid.*, p. 107) (The *burqa* eventually became the answer to that question.) In the golden days of Islam, women apparently performed all, their religious, social, educational, and political duties without giving up *purdah*. As the Begum sees it, the task is simply to foster patriotism and intellectual pursuits from behind the veil. (*Ibid.*, pp. 110, 194, 200)

The Begum possessed one of the greatest political powers and social status of Muslim women in her era, yet her rhetoric, deeply entrenched in orthodox interpretations of Islam, calls for a limited expansion in the traditional female roles. Her perspective is limited, because it recognizes the need for some reform and education without perceiving the need for an analysis of the relationship between women's roles and the distribution of power in society. This perspective is commonplace even today. It indicates that one can develop a platform of women's issues and support reforms without re-assessing one's interpretation of Islam, one's privileged position within an unequal society, or one's ambiguity towards the apparent freedoms exhibited in the West. Among the women in our discussion, the Begum can safely be identified as the most conservative.

Iqbalunnisa Hussain develops her views of *purdah* along the same course as the Begum. That is, she begins with Islam. The difference is that she interprets Islam in modernist terms, according to an ideology which, loosely speaking, seeks to reconcile the faith with liberal, humanitarian and individualistic values. In her book, *Changing India* (1940) she begins with the strong claim that Islam grants women equal

material, moral, and spiritual value. (*Ibid.*, p. 40) The life and teachings of the prophet Muhammed need to be re-interpreted with him in mind as a modern, rational thinker. (*Ibid.*, p. 18) Unfortunately, after his death a self-created priestly class was formed to render the Arabic text of the Quran comprehensible to illiterate masses. These "priests" presented to the people laws, narrow outdated dogma, and completely ignored the underlying principles of the religion. She names their version of Islam "Muhammedanism". (*Ibid.*, pp. 2-3) In practice it "has made life easy and killed the intellect." (*Ibid.*, p. 2) Unreasonable practices within Islam are blamed on this "priestly class".

Polygamy is another concoction of the Mohammedans. It is very religiously followed without any regard to the conditions on which it was sanctioned. It is given to understand that man by his protection of woman is making her virtuous. Neither modern psychology nor common sense supports this idea. (*Ibid.*, p. 2)

By association, the conventional practice of *purdah* is another such concoction. Only in uncivilized circles would *purdah* be considered necessary to maintaining virtue. True virtue is not external, but comes from the instinct of self-respect. This inwardness, which is at the core of Islamic principles, can never be communicated by the simplistic Mohammedans.

Once *purdah* has been safely identified as a misguided practice, opposed to true Islamic principles, Iqbalunnisa goes onto elaborate her point. She writes that *purdah* is considered necessary to virtue only in uncivilized circles; as a result it ruins the health, education, and personality of uncivilized women. "Modern education aims at the real *purdah*, the development of character, personality, and the discipline of one's emotions and instincts." (*Ibid.*, p. 121) Because *purdah* is detrimental to one's health and development,



it is becoming increasingly disadvantageous. Combined with lack of education among women, it has made them unfit to take care of or support themselves. (*Ibid.*, p. 47) Until women are freed from the confines of *purdah* and illiteracy, the regeneration of the Muslim nation will be impossible.

It is no wonder that in his introduction to her book, the Englishman hoped that Iqbalunnisa's work would "prove to be a stimulus to other Muhammedan ladies in India to follow the path that... will ultimately lead to the complete emancipation of Indian womanhood." (*Ibid.*, p. iv) Her activities were not overtly political, and, her rhetoric was sufficiently western-sounding in the values it espoused. To an Englishman she would seem well on the right track. But Iqbalunnisa's work was part of a trend that was easily misinterpreted abroad. Liberalism was not the exclusive property of the West; if necessary its ideas could be extracted from Hindu and Muslim philosophies as well. Part of the project of nationalism was to recuperate these ideas from indigenous culture in a process of reconciliation with the West, not submission to its influence. Iqbalunnisa was widely travelled, educated, and independent. *Changing India* gave the fullest expression to her belief that Islam and Muslim culture could not only survive, but flourish, if Muslims allowed the modernism suppressed by ignorance to surface. The re-interpretation of *purdah* as an inward principle to be upheld by both sexes would be part of this larger task.

Iqbalunnisa was freer to express her unorthodox opinions because she was not a public figure. She did not carry the same symbolism as the Begum of Bhopal or Bi Amman did before her. If we turn briefly to Bi Amman and the discourse of the Khilafat Movement, we will see her gradual emergence from *purdah* was so caught up with overloaded cultural and political symbols, that its

potential radicalism was almost completely lost.

All women's participation in Khilafat agitation was premised on this formulation: pan-Islamism was the family; all Muslims were brothers and sisters; all had an equal responsibility to preserve the integrity of their family and religion. As Minault writes, this feeling of Islamic brotherhood was one of the few things on which most Indian Muslims could agree.<sup>40</sup> The movement made women realize that their religious and familial responsibilities extended to this larger Muslim "family". A woman could serve the Khilafat by understanding that her political duties began within her own home. Begum Akbari, an active worker for the cause, delivered these words in the course of a speech on the treatment of "defaulters", those who were not obeying the religious orders called for by the movement:

Are we not masters in our homes? If we are we can compel the men to observe these resolutions religiously. If you are firm to your purpose you can keep the men strictly to the track. If you desire the impossible can be made possible. Your religious belief is on trial today... If you desire to stand well in the eyes of God and his Prophet, if you long to enter Paradise as the retinue of Hazrat Sayida Fatimatuz Zahra you should not neglect vow and religious duty for a moment.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, Islam became the inspiration and the purpose for any mobilization of women.

In a speech to the All-Indian Ladies Conference in December, 1921, Bi Amman outlined to her "sisters" their duties. The first was faith and loyalty to God; she went on to plea for a united stand, without which India could never be free from foreign rule. Her speech was a political call to redress the ills which had plagued Muslims since the Rowlatt Act, the massacre at Jallianwala Bagh, and splitting up of the Khilafat. She reminded her sisters that God's law applied to men and women alike, and the same duties were required of both.



Indian women had forgotten their responsibilities by growing too accustomed to lives of leisure. It was time for women to join men as soldiers in this battle. Armed with the Quran and with the shastras, women were to go forth without fear of imprisonment.<sup>42</sup> Note that the conjunction of Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement with the Khilafat agitation had made Bi Amman's words temporarily applicable to the cause of Indian nationalism as well as pan-Islamism.

All of Bi Amman's appeals were related to a cause greater than herself or her audience. Whether she was fund-raising for Ataturk's government, for the preservation of Islamic holy places, or for the Khilafat, she placed female symbolism in service of this cause. If she spoke from behind her veil to members of the Muslim League and became the first Muslim woman to speak to a mixed political gathering, it was only her role as mother of the Ali brothers that permitted her to extend the bounds of her maternalism. If she later lifted her veil to speak to a mass meeting in the Punjab, it was to urge "her sons" to be brave. In fact, this was a popular chant from that era:

Thus spoke the mother of Muhammad Ali  
 Son, give your life for the Khilafat.  
 And with you, too, Shaukat Ali,  
 Son, give your life for the Khilafat.  
 Don't give your old mother cause for grief,  
 But confessing your faith, give up your life.<sup>43</sup>

Bi Amman reminded everyone that God was with them and that she, their symbolic mother, would be ready to go to jail or hang for the sake of her country and her religion.<sup>44</sup>

This was the kind of rhetoric that lived and died with its cause. Without the Khilafat Movement, Bi Amman served no purpose, and women could continue with their lives as usual. The legacy of this kind of mobilization was to be felt after 1937, when the Muslim

League summoned Islam once again to challenge women into serving yet another noble cause. The days of Bi Amman were warmly remembered, as women prepared for the sacrifices that Muslim nationalism would once again demand of them.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain is unique among the women we are discussing, in that her writing displays a shrewd understanding of Islam, men, and class as co-operating in the subjection of women. She was radical for her times because she saw women's progress as valid in itself, requiring no justification within a greater cause, and also inextricable from the need to reform society as a whole. She wrote extensively about *purdah* and education because she felt that the two were linked; release from the restrictions of one would give access to the other, which in turn, would be the only way for women to break out of their state of deplorable subjugation.<sup>45</sup>

Although the logic of Rokeya's arguments does not rest upon religious tenets, it is useful for purposes of comparison with the women discussed above, to begin with a summary of her treatment of Islam and the traditionalists who ignored women's issues.<sup>46</sup> If it is divine ordination which leads fundamentalists to claim that men are innately superior to women, Rokeya will challenge the divine scriptures directly. She questions the Quranic law which, in certain cases, equates the testimony of two women with that of one man.

Had God Himself intended women to be inferior, He would have ordained it so that mothers would have given birth to daughters at the end of the fifth month of pregnancy. The supply of mother's milk would naturally have been half of that in case of a son. But that is not the case. How can it be? Is not God just and most merciful?<sup>47</sup>

She soon shifts her focus from the religious texts to the way they have been used by men to oppress



women. Over the centuries women may have tried to defend themselves with the aid of religious injunctions but have been so conditioned by men into believing they are slaves that now they no longer protest.<sup>48</sup> Rokeya concludes that women "should not submit quickly to such oppression in the name of religion."<sup>49</sup> Religion itself has become a means to their oppression.

Men have published these scriptures as commands of God to keep us in darkness... In ancient times whoever had become renowned to others by his own merit made himself known as a god or a god-sent messenger, and he tried to educate the uncivilized barbarians. Gradually, as the intelligence and perception of the inhabitants of the world increased, the prophets (that is, God's messengers) and gods also became more and more clever.

So you see that these religious scriptures are nothing but regulations made by men. The thing that you hear in the prescriptions of the sages might be contrary in regulations made by a lady sage.... Anyway, in the name of religion now we should no longer bear the unjustifiable mastery of the males with heads bowed down.<sup>50</sup>

This is a daring statement for a woman to make in public today, let alone in 1904. Rokeya later clarifies her position somewhat by denying that she means to doubt the existence of God. Her point is simply that religion has deepened women's slavery. To break out of this bondage, Rokeya does not seek the help of even God, but reminds women that only they are capable of helping themselves.

In this way the institution of *purdah* is stripped of its religious guise and exposed as a man-made social problem. In *The Secluded Ones*, a collection of articles describing the tragic madness of *purdah* as practiced, she recounts the following incident:

Once, a house caught fire. The mistress of the house had the presence of mind to collect her jewelry in a handbag and hurry out of the bedroom.

But at the door, she found the courtyard full of strangers fighting the fire. She could not come out in front of them. So she went back to her bedroom with the bag and hid under her bed. She burned to death but did not come out. Long live *purdah*!<sup>51</sup>

In a few sentences Rokeya has conveyed the utter impracticality of seclusion, and the way, even for women, preference for honour and prestige has replaced common sense. What has this done to the character of women? If *purdah* does not literally kill them, it does something equally devastating to their spirit.

In whatever condition we live, we always live in the house of our guardians... It is not known to me whether even in the grave we live in the house of our guardian... We have not got even a thatched cottage as our own home. In the animal world no creature is as shelterless as we are. All have homes — only we have none.<sup>52</sup>

Her argument here turns back to men. "By making us captives of their hearts they have deprived us of the sunshine of knowledge and pure air and for these we are gradually dying."<sup>53</sup> Captivity has killed in women that quality which Rokeya is doing her best to revive.

Therefore, it may be seen that their excess care is the cause of our ruin. Being always well-protected against the dangers of this world we have completely lost our courage, confidence and strength. Instead of being self-reliant we have become totally dependent on our husbands.<sup>54</sup>

If this is the problem, how does Rokeya provide a solution?

In 1908 Rokeya published a collection of her essays and articles on *purdah* entitled *Motichur*. Roushan Jahan has extrapolated the highlights of Rokeya's strategy from this collection. She summarizes Rokeya's argument in the following way. Women have been made economically dependent upon men for historical reasons, but given equal opportunity they can



prove that they are equal to them both mentally and spiritually. Men perpetuate their domination over women through *purdah*. By keeping them away from opportunities to study and work, men further prevent women from exercising their legal rights by manipulating these man-made laws and exploiting women's ignorance. The whole of society suffers from the unhealthy, unnatural development of its female half. In addition to this, the mental and physical deficiencies suffered by women make them unfit even for their assigned roles as housewives and mothers. Therefore, it is a moral and practical imperative to free women from *purdah*, and give them access to education. All of society, including its men, would benefit from an educated, responsible, and useful female population.<sup>55</sup>

Rokeya entreats women to take the first step towards change by mustering up "independence and vigour". They will need courage to face the cruel resistance that will meet them in outside society. For added strength, "all women should advance towards freedom at the same time."<sup>56</sup> She defines freedom as that state in which women possess as much independence as men, and have achieved complete equality with them.

To achieve equality with men we shall do whatever is necessary. If now we can gain freedom by earning our livelihood independently, we shall do that... We shall hold all kinds of posts... Why should we not earn? Have we not got hands, legs, or intelligence? In what are we lacking? The labour that we perform in the household of our husbands, with that shall we not be able to do independent business?<sup>57</sup>

But these words sound more like the utopian short story, "Sultana's Dream", in which a woman dreams that she is in Ladyland, where women run the country and keep their men in *purdah*. Clearly, she feels that any kind of progress is determined by society's

attitude towards *purdah*. Long before women can work side by side with men, they must establish what kind of *purdah* they will observe.

Rokeya found conventional *purdah* akin to the enslavement of women. She described it to a meeting of the Bengal Women's Education Conference as "a deadly carbonic acid gas, which, if people did not guard against it, causes a painless death."<sup>58</sup> Yet, women's poor condition is not due to seclusion only, but rather due to the lack of education caused by *purdah* restrictions. For this reason Rokeya recommends a "necessary and moderate" *purdah* that would not hold women back from educational pursuits. The "artificial customs" of an "unjust *purdah*" must therefore, be abandoned.<sup>59</sup> Like Iqbalunnisa, Rokeya believes that true *purdah* is observed as an inward self-respect and concern for honour. The *burqa* seems to be the compromise solution: "By *purdah* I mean covering the body well, not staying confined."<sup>60</sup> Even so, a woman will only free herself when she becomes capable of independent thought and decisions. Without freedom from mental slavery, freedom from the house or even the veil, makes no sense. We can see that the difficulty here is that neither freedom follows from the other, yet each is a precondition for the achievement of the other.

Rokeya places the onus for change upon women, but at the same time realizes that the forces collaborating in their oppression must be tackled. She does not evolve a strategy for affecting wider social change, but the fact that she is aware of the greater context to women's issues distinguishes her from the women discussed earlier. It is apparent from the above quotations that Rokeya derides men and man-made religion for placing women into a state of slavery. Included in this are man-made laws: "Alas, law aids those who have money and influence. It is not meant to



help vulnerable women like us."<sup>61</sup> Rokeya knows that women of all classes suffer, but does not directly address the specificity of excessive *purdah* as an upper-class vice. In this way her call for women to unite in the fight for release from *purdah*, for education, for equality, and for a better society beyond sectarianism and colonialism,<sup>62</sup> has a naive ring to it. Considering that the Begum of Bhopal never identified any sources of women's oppression (other than lack of education, for which she did not blame men), her contemporary Rokeya could hardly be dismissed for not exploring her observations on class to a greater depth.

## CHAPTER IV

### The Issue of Female Education

Education was the crucial public issue for reformers. Unlike *purdah*, it did not seem to threaten the very fibre of society. Government, nationalists, social reformers, male and female alike, eagerly paid lip service to the cause. Actual improvement of the situation was another matter. Primary education among Muslim women was already scarce and higher education almost unheard of. In 1931, Indian schools and colleges had five times as many boys enrolled as girls. As late as 1936, only 1.5% of the total female population in India was receiving some sort of education.<sup>63</sup> Statistics abound, but for our purposes it is enough to recognize how serious the problem was and the important place it held in the rhetoric of our Muslim women reformers.

All Muslim reformers were in a dilemma: how to educate women without placing their virtue, and with it the self-respect of their society, at risk? No legal or social reforms made sense if they were made at the expense of a woman's honour. Therefore, each reformer had to prove that education would not violate the principle of *purdah*.

The Begum of Bhopal advocated female education because she treated it as a cause worthy for its own



sake. The fact that she wrote *Al-Hijab*, a work which would reassure even the most conservative Muslim scholar that *purdah* restrictions would not need to be seriously modified, shows that she needed to prove how unthreatening her position was. This was required because schools for Muslim girls, such as the ones she had sponsored in Bhopal and at Aligarh, did indeed stretch conventions to permit the girls to leave home and attend classes.

Her commitment to female education was clear from her belief that it served more than a functional purpose.

It is a stupid thing, to my mind, to teach the girls to read and write, and then leave them to their fate. The very least that should be done for them, is to give them a thorough grounding in things that matter, and to awaken the dormant soul in them.<sup>64</sup>

Once an argument suggests that the purpose of a girl's education is defeated unless it causes an awakening deep within her spirit, its natural conclusion is that she should fulfill the potential of her new consciousness. This is threatening because it puts a woman on the same level as a man, who historically has been encouraged to cultivate his intellect because knowledge has value in itself.

She tries to cloud over her point with wider justifications.

A knowledge of household matters is also, in my judgment, very necessary, and needlework and domestic economy need to be included in the curricula of girls' schools.<sup>65</sup>

Her emphasis on traditional female occupations, and her insistence that *purdah* be observed in the schools, can be read as "antidotes" to the radicalism of supporting female education as valid in itself.

The Begum had the means at her disposal to win

support for her schools. She opened a school in Bhopal for poor girls to learn how to make ordinary items for household use, and "thus earn the art of helping themselves." State nobles and officials promised donations.

"This was a hopeful sign, for just as it is the duty of the administration to serve the public, so is it incumbent on the higher classes to co-operate with the administration, and help the needy and the poor."<sup>66</sup>

The notion of upper-class charity went a long way in making female education acceptable. The Begum opened a school for Hindu girls, explaining that their educational/religious needs would differ from their Muslim sisters. She stated that education should be tailored to the special needs of various classes to help each strata of society operate more efficiently.<sup>67</sup> The principle of education as a spiritual awakening was lost. Islamic orthodoxy was only minimally ruffled, *purdah* was only very quietly challenged, state officials saw no threat to the social hierarchy, but a number of girls' schools were opened.

Iqbalunnisa Hussain's reasoning was different from the Begum's because she had a modernist interpretation of Islam. She saw it as a religion which valued the pursuit of knowledge and the fulfillment of individual potential. For example, she accused "Muhammedans" of killing the intellect of Muslims. Likewise, *purdah* was condemned for the damage it caused women's educational development, health, and personality. *Purdah* and lack of female education were diagnosed as two of the ills which had caused the Muslim nation to degenerate.

Once she had established that Islam was on her side, she could afford to be indignant with society. "Small wonder then that the tyranny of man should breed mental inefficiency in women who get their own



back by tyrannizing over their children." (*Changing India*: p. 48) Women, as the instructors of humanity, are through their own ignorance causing the death of the Muslim nation. They have failed to make their children "brave, intellectual, healthy and helpful." Instead they have taught them "idleness, superstition, fatalism, and carelessness." (*Ibid.*, p. 23)

Her reasoning was also different from the Begum's in that she connected *purdah* and education as parts of the same social evil. *Purdah* was becoming increasingly disadvantageous because it affected, among other things, a woman's education. The suggestion was that if *purdah* did not hinder a woman's development, and in turn the progress of the Muslim nation, Iqbalunnisa would have nothing to complain about.

Did Iqbalunnisa sense, like the Begum, that too much emphasis on the validity of women's issues in themselves would be impractical? After all, she ran her own school. She also publicly claimed that girls should be educated before marriage. Her logic sounds familiar:

"Efficient girls will not only be an asset to the regeneration of our nation but also will be suitable companions to their educated husbands and educated mothers to their children." (*Ibid.*, p. 96)

This statement reminds us of the words male reformers used during the Aligarh days to justify female education. The ultimate power of men was implicitly acknowledged in such rhetoric. Women reformers had not only to persuade other women to increase their awareness, but every step of the way they also had to appear as non-threatening to men. They must have succeeded for A.N. Basu to write, "The women's movement in India had none of the man-woman antagonism characteristic of women's movements in the West."<sup>68</sup>

Bi Amman was an activist whose role was almost

completely determined by the political agenda of men. Female education was not the issue which caused her to leave *purdah* and appeal to the public. The cause of Islam was the purpose of her participation in politics. Nevertheless, the act of Bi Amman educating herself and entering public life, if only to serve a symbolic function, had a deep impact on Muslim women who had never conceived of such a role model in their midst before.<sup>69</sup> Likewise, the acts of opening schools were in themselves highly progressive experiments, although the Begum of Bhopal and Iqbalunnisa Hussain cushioned much of their radical impact in placatory rhetoric. Bi Amman made women realize that their political commitment was necessary and would make a difference. This awareness was couched in a rhetoric of Islam and Muslim nationalism, which once again diffused the threat which could be posed to men and their institutions by a politicized female population. Yet again, a point of principle had been made, if not in theory then by example, only to be used for purposes other than female emancipation.

Like Iqbalunnisa, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain linked *purdah* and illiteracy as causes of women's oppression, but she did not rely upon a modernist reading of Islam or an argument of Muslim uplift to justify her reformism. Rokeya believed that slavery of women was wrong, and it was up to women to break the bonds which men had forced upon them. Freedom from *purdah* alone would not guarantee freedom from mental slavery. What was required was freedom from psychological and economic dependency on men. Education was the key to this freedom.

Rokeya flew headlong into battle with convention. Here she bitterly expresses her resentment against the lack of schools or colleges for women in Bengal:



"A man can study as much as he likes — but for us the storeroom of knowledge, which is like honey, will it ever be completely opened? If any great man of liberal mind ever tries to lift us by holding our hands, then thousands of persons present obstacle and opposition."<sup>70</sup>

Rokeya went a step further than Iqbalunnisa by acknowledging that women alone were not responsible for their ignorance. When they attempted to improve their lives, men stiffened their resistance to change.

The faults of an uneducated woman society forgives readily. But a woman who has some education, even if she does not commit any fault, is made guilty by society of some imaginary one, and putting it on the shoulders of her education makes it a hundred times more grave. And a hundred voices start saying together, "Good-bye to female education."<sup>71</sup>

Perhaps because Rokeya challenged the opposition to women's reform, she was further able to identify economic dependency as another source of women's subjugation.

Rokeya founded the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam in 1916. It "offered financial assistance to poor widows, rescued and sheltered battered wives, helped poor families to marry their daughters, and above all helped poor women to achieve literacy." The association developed a literacy program for Hindu and Muslim slum women in Calcutta. Instruction in literacy and hygiene was often met with great hostility, which continued unabated until her death in 1932. Even the curriculum of Rokeya's own school included vocational training.<sup>72</sup> She realised that education would do much to make women economically independent.

The activities of a woman reformer did not directly match, or follow from, her ideology. For example, Rokeya had already argued that *purdah* was a method of female enslavement, and that veiling was not

natural. Yet, she herself wore a *burqa*, and ran her school in observance of *purdah* restrictions. If she had not, no one would have attended.

There seems to be another contradiction in her writing. She wrote that men's "excess care" and the dependency it had created was the cause of women's ruin. Yet she also wrote,

It is not due to our living in seclusion that in recent times we have become low-spirited, narrow-minded and timid. Due to the lack of proper education our mental faculties have shrunk... Lack of education has made us unfit to get freedom. We have lost because we are unfit.<sup>73</sup>

Women were caught in a spin between restrictions of *purdah* and lack of education. As soon as one was blamed for their oppression, the other laid claim to the same dubious privilege. Even though the Begum of Bhopal and Iqbalunnisa Hussain both blamed lack of education more for having produced "unfit" women, they could not formulate any solution without first dealing with "the necessity" of *purdah*. Rokeya tackled both problems as creations of men. Men placed women in *purdah* and men denied women education. Whether women resisted the oppression of either *purdah* or ignorance, they would encounter male opposition. Therefore, the inconsistency revealed in the above quotation was less a flaw in her argument than an indication of almost paralyzing complexity.

It can be stated in this way: if we look at all the women we have discussed in terms of their activism alone, we see that they made repeated compromises with institutions or ideologies other than women's emancipation. They made concessions to Islam, to Muslim nationalism in its various stages, and to the demands of their elite class. At the same time, their rhetoric was shaped by the need to compromise. This reveals that the deepest current of their beliefs was



subject to the demands of religion, contemporary politics, and the socio-economic status quo. This is why the joint issues of *purdah* and education placed women reformers in such a dilemma. In practice, it became difficult to treat them as joint issues, because to abandon *purdah* completely necessitated the dismissal of a whole system of class and religious values.

Even in theory, as the writings of Rokeya exemplify most fully, if one wanted to condemn both social "ills" simultaneously with the same fury, it left no way out for action. How to free the body from confinement before freeing the mind from slavery? Or else: how to free the mind from ignorance before freeing the body from slavery? And most challenging of all, Rokeya's writings asked a third question: how to free either mind or body without achieving economic independence for women?

## Chapter V

### **The Rhetoric of Reformism and Feminism in the Muslim World**

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain pushed the discourse by women about women's condition, as far as it could go without turning back on itself, by placing the whole construct of gender roles into question. As such, her writings brought her to an impasse in which liberation from mind, body, and economic dependency each seemed to necessarily precede the other in the liberation of women. She did not let this paralyze her activities; her devotion to the cause of women's education continued until her death. It is for us to now place rhetoric such as hers in the context of the history of Muslim feminism and the dilemmas it is constantly confronting.

The discussion which follows will begin with a brief explanation of the current debate among western feminists on the relationship between feminism, the women's movement (or women's reformism), and women's history. This is necessary not to prove that Muslim women in South Asia, or all Muslim women, can be fitted into a western paradigm of feminism, but rather it will provide us with a framework for understanding the debate particular to feminism(s) in the Muslim world. This debate will be discussed on three levels: first, in its confrontation with Islam; second, in



its relationship to colonialism; and third, with regard to the crisis of reformism produced by problems of class, religion and culture. I do not wish to emerge with any generalizations about Muslim women; in fact, I will emphasize the naivete in viewing them as a homogenous whole. At most, the discussion will clarify the limitations of the reformist rhetoric, analyzed earlier in this paper, and with this help to explain why elite Muslim women in India never developed a cohesive women's movement to outlast their individual efforts.

The starting point of any women's history must be that there is no single definition of feminism, and that feminism is not synonymous with any one women's movement. Nonetheless, a "base-line definition" of feminism has been arrived at in the West after the realisation that politics, race, and class shape various feminisms and thus, destroy the illusion that gender alone will make women share the same consciousness. Given this.

...at the very least a feminist is someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social, economic, and political order.<sup>74</sup>

Women once believed that a common identity between women based on economic oppression, commercial exploitation, legal discrimination (and even a personal sense of inadequacy), would be expressed through women's politics and organizing. They soon discovered that "analytic differences and the political differences which spring from them have regularly been causes of division in the women's movement."<sup>75</sup> Therefore, feminism is not a term which covers all women's activities or aspects of the women's movement: women's actions are not all feminist, and some women's campaigns are not self-consciously feminist despite

their appearance. There is a division between feminism, as a field of study pertaining to the "active desire to change women's position in society",<sup>76</sup> and the actual changes in women's position. Feminism includes these changes, but is not defined as a concept or field of study because of them.

Awareness of this division allows historians to focus on different versions of feminism, ones which are not equated with women's politics. For example, "feminism has been able to exist as an intellectual tendency without a movement, or as a strand within very different movements."<sup>77</sup> The history of feminism is not going to be the same as the history of the achievement of the aims of the women's movement. And very importantly for our discussion:

The focus on feminism as activity, as campaigns around issues, tends to underplay the nature of the general debate about women and the extent to which feminists were involved in setting its terms.<sup>78</sup>

The old dichotomy which opposes men, who think, to women, who act, will be upheld unless we move beyond it and ask: "in their acting, what ideas were feminist women drawing on, using, transforming, creating?"<sup>79</sup> Women have come to be seen as the subject of feminism, rather than simply the object of it. "Women are its subjects, its enunciators, the creators of its theory, of its practice, and of its language."<sup>80</sup> But women are not represented by feminists. In fact, the unity of the concept "women" is itself something which can be subjected to the rigours of psychoanalytical interpretation or the historical analysis of gender.

The issues which western feminists have now placed at the center of the debate are useful for any non-western feminist historian, because each culture which has produced some kind of women's movement has done so out of its own unique history of gender construction.



Gender is a social category, "a way of referring to the social organization of the relationship between the sexes."<sup>81</sup>

The realization of the radical potential of women's history comes in the writing of histories that focus on women's experiences and analyze the ways in which politics construct gender and gender constructs politics.<sup>82</sup>

Research into the histories of Muslim women has, indeed, attempted to trace the process of gender construction, which has created a supposedly extraordinary inequality between the sexes. But, rather than focus on politics, the historian has most often singled out Islam as the greatest determining factor in the formation of gender identity and male-female dynamics in the Muslim world.

This has seriously limited our understanding of women. In particular it has limited the historian's ability to expose "the often silent and hidden operations of gender",<sup>83</sup> that influence social organizations in more subtle ways. Islam has been used as the authority which dictates women's function in society, and the only moments of women's rebellion or active leadership are recognized in the deeds of the occasional "great woman". The first problem with this approach lies ofcourse in its own politics: it is orientalist. Western scholars have tended to view the Muslim world as a homogeneous Other, to be decoded by deciphering the workings of Islam, the phenomenon which gives it a cohesive identity. Diversity among women according to region, class, politics, and religious practice has been overlooked. Unfortunately, scholars from Muslim countries themselves have often internalized this approach, and write "bourgeois" histories of women's movements. These histories reinforce orientalist stereotypes of Islam by recounting women's struggles as western-inspired revolts against "Islamic despotism"; as

occurrences only among the middle to upper classes; and as inspired by men.<sup>84</sup>

The second problem with this approach is that it ignores subaltern participation in politics. It assumes that women's exclusion from the public world meant that women's private, domestic spheres have no bearing upon wider social organization or official forms of power.<sup>85</sup> Women as a subaltern group, capable of sustained rebellion against institutions of power, are not even conceived of by most historians of Muslim women, who prefer to view all Muslim women as alike and represented by the educated elite who led any struggles for reform.

In this paper, I have attempted to take into account the debate among western feminists, as well as the contemporary critique of "Muslim women", as objects of historical research. First, I have self-consciously chosen a few elite Indian Muslim women to focus upon. Although class and politics of gender have not been the subjects of my analysis, I have contextualized my discussion in the social and political life of the elite Indian Muslims. This has allowed us to see women's issues as important symbols in the emerging Muslim political identity.

Second, the divisions between feminism and the women's movement has provided us with the freedom to analyze the discourse of a few Muslim women as separate from their activities. We may be tempted to judge the "feminism" of these women according to modern criteria, but once we realize that the term itself is vague, applicable only to a general ideology prescribing change in gender roles, and that its various ideals have evolved through history, we become interested in tracing the history of an intellectual feminism. We want to investigate the extent to which women "set the terms" for the debates and activities of



the reformers.

In the early part of this century, the ideas women were "drawing on, using, transforming, creating" came from Islamic ideology, modern western thought, and the pull of nationalism rapidly taking shape. The women we have discussed developed their position on religion rather than analyzing women's subjugation in class or socio-economic terms. Their rhetoric, however, was not developed independently from their personal involvements with reformism. As such rhetoric and action influenced each other, and both were largely determined by their upper-class status. Yet, we have focussed almost exclusively on the discourse of these four women, not to force a separation of it from their activities, but to show how they tackled prevailing ideologies in order to effect change. A history of women's discourse on the subject provides insight into the way religion has been viewed as help, hindrance, or inspiration to the cause of women.

Third, studies of Muslim women have been accused of an excessive concentration on Islam at the expense of a more comprehensive Marxist analysis, which recognizes a diversity of experience. Indeed, one purpose of this paper has been to show the importance of Islamic doctrine, but while taking into account the political function of Islamic ideology as a symbol, and a tool of Muslim nationalists. Most importantly, each of the women we have discussed has interpreted Islam according to her own stakes in the status quo, and the political outlook it has given her. Hence, the orthodoxy of the Begum of Bhopal and her notion of *purdah* as a sign of civilization. Equally significant, we have seen the influence western education had upon Iqbalunnisa Hussain's modernism. The powerful traditionalism of Bi Amman was put in service of pan-Islamism, while the fury and relentless individualism of Begum Rokeya put



not only Islam, but the whole organization of society, into question. Even if it has only been a luxury for elite women to spend so much time referring to Islam, they have been forced to do so, because Islam has helped to define their social status, their politics, and their gender roles. In short, it has been a dominant ideology in their lives.

There is no doubt that Muslim women are not going to possess the same kind of feminism by virtue of a common religion. Yet within any given region, class and political structure, it is still going to influence the way women perceive themselves and envision a better future. Fatima Mernissi has closely examined relations between men and women, as conceived in the Islamic textual tradition. Although she writes within the Arab context, she emerges with questions that are vital to Muslims everywhere. That is, if the Quran and other respected scholarly texts can be proven to institutionalize inequality between the sexes, then it becomes difficult for all Muslim women to strive for a radical restructuring of sex roles without rejecting Islam. Since Islam also gives women a profound sense of identity, they will not quickly dismiss it. Muslim women, therefore, do share a common dilemma.

Mernissi and Fatma Sabbah arrive at the conclusion that in the Muslim view, a woman is not considered fully human.<sup>86</sup> She is a threat to the social order, because she possesses a potentially overwhelming sexuality which, if indulged, will cause chaos. In the Muslim order of things, man's duty is to serve Allah and women's role is to serve man. If man does not contain the potentially destructive power of woman, she will distract him from his primary obligation. This interpretation is the basis for an elaborate reading of sexuality, and the Muslim social order. For our purposes, their insights pave the way for asking, first: if



Islam recognizes woman's potential, and then institutionally curbs it, does that leave any way out for a believing Muslim to reform the structure and allow women individual freedom, without infringing upon the divine order of things? Second, how useful is it to view women's liberation as an exclusively religious problem, especially when Islamic doctrines are themselves rooted in cultural, socio-economic conditions of the pre-Islamic Arab world?

It is evident that from the Begum of Bhopal onwards, elite women reformers understood women's liberation as a religious issue. The only woman who did not turn to Islamic doctrine for guidance was Rokeya. However, she did justify her reformism by stating that God could not really have meant to make women inferior to men. The key question which emerges from all their rhetoric is this: what is the relationship between liberation of the mind, of the body, and economic independence? Islam does provide an answer to this question for men. Namely, the satisfaction of a healthy sexuality is a necessary precondition to fulfilling one's social and religious duties. If women were permitted economic independence, and their sexual needs were recognized, what would be the need to place an artificial barrier between the sexes? It can be argued that Islam does recognize these needs in women, but its institutionalized legal and social subjugation of them is based on fear. But if women can demonstrate that once freed, they will not upset the social commitment to Allah, then there should be no need for men to feel threatened. This explains why women reformers are intent on proving that they are not threatening; it is a way to counteract a premise of Muslim thought without rejecting the ideal of a Muslim *ummah*.

One of the characteristics of Muslim feminism is that its task is by definition different from feminism in



the West.<sup>87</sup> Christian thought is premised on the inherent inferiority of women. Hence, the struggle of women is to prove their equality to men. Muslim thought is premised on an overdetermined view of female sexuality, which recognizes a woman as a "potent, aggressive individual."<sup>88</sup> Individuality, whether male or female, is anathema to the Muslim concept of communal subjugation to the will of Allah.<sup>89</sup> This makes the struggle for women's liberation actually an effort not to achieve equality with men, but to redefine both gender roles. That is, both men and women have to restructure their relationship to each other in such a way that both can realize and express their individuality, while at the same time maintaining the delicate balance between earthly and divine required of the Muslim *ummah*.<sup>90</sup>

Is this a realistic option for Muslims? None of the discourses discussed in this paper suggest such a combination of redefining gender roles and retaining the Muslim communal ideal. The Begum of Bhopal, Iqbalunnisa Hussain, and Bi Amman concentrated their efforts on extracting the "true" interpretation of women's role in Islam. They did not seriously challenge men's role, nor did they reject the religious doctrine. Begum Rokeya felt it necessary to abandon Islam as a prescriptive source for women's lives, choosing instead to advocate a radical restructuring of society. It appears that the great challenge, or the greatest folly of all is to work towards a realization of Islamic ideals and a radical restructuring of gender roles at the same time.

Another feature of Muslim feminism, which also affects its solution to the problem of mind/body liberation, is its relationship with the West. Indian Muslims have a history of being colonized, and of developing a nationalism in response to their fragile hold on political power. From the outset, women's issues



have been politicized by being contextualized within colonial domination. The educated Muslim women of India would not compromise their religious identity nor their political identity (be it separatist or all-Indian) in their quest for reforms. Each woman discussed in this paper insisted that she did not wish blindly to emulate western norms. At the same time, she strongly emphasized her Muslim identity: whether in the sense of religious practice, cultural affiliation, separatist politics, or concern for the uplift of society as a whole.

Women's reform was a doubly sensitive issue in Indian society because it carried with it the stigma of British designs. Frantz Fanon writes that the French manipulated Algerian women as part of the colonial project.

Converting the woman, winning her over to the foreign values, wrenching her free from her status, was at the same time achieving a real power over the man and attaining a practical, effective means of destructuring Algerian culture.<sup>91</sup>

The conversion of women masqueraded as an attempt to liberate them from oppression by their own men. Nineteenth-century social reformism in British India owes much to this same colonial project. As Gayatri Spivak writes of the campaign against suttee: it created a scenario of "brown women saved by white men from brown men."<sup>92</sup> Although Indian Muslims at first disassociated themselves from the "Hindu" practices of suttee, child marriages, and female infanticide, when their quest for a separate political identity grew, they were forced to pay some attention to women's issues, and display their new progressiveness. But, as we have seen in our analysis of reformist rhetoric, each issue associated with women was immediately bogged down with conflicting symbolism. Was an educated Muslim woman, free from *purdah* restrictions, a symbol of triumph for the British or the Muslims?

In the Algerian struggle against colonialism, the veil became a symbol of triumph over the French. Women revolutionaries discarded the veil, as a sign of accession to the West, only to use this image as a false front to carry out their subversion of colonial power.<sup>93</sup> The veil was not discarded, but worn during the Iranian revolution as a symbol of national and religious identity. In both cases, the underlying principle of women's virtue may have remained unchanged, but the external manifestation of it -- the veil -- was turned into a flexible symbol of political/cultural allegiance.

It is not surprising then, that as far back as 1920 Indian Muslims were divided in their opinion on *purdah*. The Begum of Bhopal was not alone in her belief that it was a sign of "civilization" and religious piety. Very few women reformers of that era actually wanted to go so far as to abandon the veil. It was only when Congress and Muslim League politics began to deliberately include women on their platforms that more open liberalism became in vogue as part of nationalist ideology. Women who worked for the League, like Begum Shah Nawaz or even Fatima Jinnah, openly preached a liberalism that was condoned by Jinnah, the leader of an increasingly influential and politicized Muslim population. It seems that the various symbolic functions of *purdah*, in all its forms, is the best example of the way in which women's subjugation is a function of the interests and politics of her class, its manipulation of Islam, and its dynamics with the West.



## CONCLUSIONS

We have established that rhetoric may not directly address the class, or socio-economic, inequalities which contribute to women's oppression, but it is still shaped by such realities. And further, feminism, or the desire to improve the quality of women's lives through a restructuring of society, is only one strand of the ideologies expressed in the discourse of reformism. Social reformers such as the women whose writings we have analyzed closely, were unique in their commitment to female "uplift", but remained entrenched in the wider political and religious concerns of the Muslim elite. As alienated from the "masses", whom they sought to "uplift", they were incapable of forming cross or inter-class groups, and often spoke of their own women with condescension. The words of Begum Shah Nawaz exemplify the reformist mentality which was to carry over into the Pakistan women's movement after Independence.

Yet, as individuals who challenged convention, these women were among the first to formulate the crucial questions. How will women come to terms with Islam? Do they want to extend their gender roles, or do they want to restructure those roles as defined for themselves as well as men? Do women want "dignity and status" within the family, or do they want freedom to work? Should elite women help to "uplift" their less privileged sisters, or should they/can they form a cross-

class platform with them, and not let their issues become side-tracked? What threatens Muslim women the most; western influences, Islamic reactionaries or men? These are certainly not all the issues Muslim women in India have had to confront, but they are those which "set the terms" for any contemporary feminist debate. It appears that without the upsurge in consciousness provided by the artificial "highs" of anti-colonial and nationalist movements, women today are floundering in their search for answers to their questions.



## FOOTNOTES

### *Introduction*

1. Katherine Mayo, *Mother India* (London, 1927), pp. 105-6.
2. For a testimony to Jinnah's alleged support for women, read *Quaid-e-Azam and Muslim Women* (Government of Pakistan, 1976). Jinnah's manipulation of the inheritance law debate in the Punjab is described in D. Gilmartin, "Kinship, Women, and Politics in Twentieth Century Punjab", in G. Minault (ed.), *The Extended Family* (Delhi, 1981).
3. Speech by Begum Shah Nawaz, quoted in *The Statesman*, 17 March, 1940. Taken from V.R. Jones and L.B. Jones, *Women in Islam* (London, 1943), p. 53.

### Chapter I

4. See David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton University Press, 1978).
5. Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Preceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 2-9, 23.

6. From Lahore, Sayyid Mumtaz Ali, women's educationalist and founder of the Urdu women's magazine *Tahzib-e-Niswan*, was an enthusiastic supporter and critic of the Anjuman.
7. Gail Minault, "Sisterhood or Separatism? The All-India Muslim Ladies Conference and the Nationalist Movement", in G. Minault (ed.), *The Extended Family* (Delhi, 1981), p. 87.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 88 and see *Report Ijlas Awwal, All-India Muslim Ladies Conference 1914*, compiled by Sheikh Abdullah (Aligarh, 1915), as well as *Report Ijlas Dom, AIMLC 1915*, compiled by Nafis Dulhan (Aligarh, 1915).

**Note:** The Begum of Bhopal withdrew her funding of the Anjuman when pettiness over *purdah* observance at its meetings, and political in-fighting against Aligarhist domination of Muslim organizations caused it to disintegrate. She helped found the All-India Women's Conference in 1927.

9. Gail Minault, "Sisterhood or Separatism? p. 89, and G. Minault, "Purdah Politics: The Role of Muslim Women in Indian Nationalism, 1911-1942", in H. Papanek and G. Minault (eds.), *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia* (Delhi, 1982), p. 25.
10. Quote by Veena Mazumdar in G. Forbes, "The Indian Women's Movement", in G. Minault, *The Extended Family*, p. 53.
11. Vijay Agnew, *Elite Women in Indian Politics* (Delhi, 1979), p. 9.
12. Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 133-175.
13. Paul R. Brass, *Language, Religion and Politics in*



- North India* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 178-79.
14. Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, *Muslim Women's Role in the Pakistan Movement* (University of the Punjab, 1981 edn.). See this book as an illustration of this point.
  15. D. Gilmartin, "Kinship, Women, and Politics in Twentieth Century Punjab", pp. 161-69.
  16. See *Quaid-e-Azam and Muslim Women* for their own perceptions of Jinnah.
  17. V. Agnew, *Elite Women in Indian Politics*, p. 140.
  18. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
  19. G. Forbes, "The Indian Women's Movement", pp. 58-61, in which it is explained that the AIWC debated throughout the 1930's the extent to which it would allow political affiliations to affect its social agenda. Its eventual loyalty to Congress caused many Muslim women to resign.
  20. *Ibid.*, pp. 63-4.

## Chapter II

21. G. Minault, "Purdah Politics", p. 257.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Information drawn from G. Minault, "Sisterhood or Separatism?".
24. G. Minault, *The Khilafat Movement* (New York, 1982), pp. 35-6.
25. G. Minault, "Purdah Politics", pp. 252-3.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 253-5.
27. Iqbalunnisa Hussain, *Changing India: A Muslim Woman Speaks* (Bangalore, 1940), pp. i-iii.

28. *Ibid.*, p. iii.
29. Taken from the introduction by Roushan Jahan to Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream and Selections from the Secluded Ones*, (ed.), R. Jahan (New York, 1988) pp. xi-xii.
30. Shahanara Husain, "Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain: Pioneer Muslim Feminist of Bengal", in *Women, Development, Devotionalism, Nationalism: Bengal Studies 1985* (Michigan, 1986), pp. 4-5.
31. Taken from a chapter "'Sultana's Dream': Purdah Reversed", by R. Jahan in R.S. Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 1.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
33. Taken from introduction by R. Jahan to R. S. Hossain. *Sultana's Dream*, pp. vii-viii.

### Chapter III

34. For details of the relationship of *purdah* to class and employment, see H. Papanek, "Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter", in H. Papanek and G. Minault (eds.), *Separate Worlds*.
35. K. Mayo, *Mother India*, pp. 109, 114.
36. As quoted in H. Papanek, *op.cit.*, p. 23.
37. Sultan Jahan Begum, *Al-Hijab or Why Purdah is Necessary* (Calcutta, 1922).
38. Sultan Jahan Begum, *Muslim Homes: Part 1, A Present to The Married Couple* (Calcutta, 1916).
39. G. Minault, "Sisterhood or Separatism?" p. 101.
40. G. Minault, *The Khilafat Movement*, p. 57.
41. Speech delivered by Begum Akbari, quoted in the



- Independent*, May 2, 1920.
42. Speech delivered by Bi Amman, quoted in Abdur Razzaq Qureshi (ed.), *Nava-e-Azadi* (Bombay, 1957). Translated from Urdu by the author.
  43. G. Minault, "Purdah Politics", p. 254.
  44. *Independent*, September 28, 1921.
  45. R.S. Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 47.
  46. As R. Jahan writes in *Ibid.*, pp. 44-47, the most significant difference between Bengali Hindu and Muslim quests for identity throughout the nineteenth century was that the former debated women's issues with great urgency, whereas the latter remained silent on the subject until Rokeya began her campaign.
  47. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
  48. S. Husain, "Begum Rokeya", p. 6.
  49. Op. cit., p. 48. (R. Jahan)
  50. S. Husain, op. cit.
  51. R. Jahan in R.S. Hossain, op. cit., p. 26.
  52. S. Husain, "Begum Rokeya", pp. 10-11.
  53. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
  54. *Ibid.*
  55. R. Jahan in R.S. Hossain, op. cit., p. 47.
  56. S. Husain, "Begum Rokeya", p. 7.
  57. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.
  58. *Stri Dharma*, vol. 10, no. 7, May 1927.
  59. R. Jahan in R.S. Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 52, and S. Husain, "Begum Rokeya", p. 10.
  60. R.S. Hossain, *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.* Also, for laws which were supposed to guarantee women some protection, see K.C. Nagarkar, *Statutes for the Protection of Women and Children in British India* (Bombay, 1934). Apparently, women observing *purdah* were protected by the courts from having to testify in public so as "to relieve them of the consequences of their own acts as they can scarcely be deemed *sui generis*". It was stated that it should be classified legally along with "persons suffering from disabilities like infants and lunatics." Information from J.N. Mukerjee, *The Law Relating to Paradanashins in British India* (Calcutta, 1906). It would be useful to investigate to what extent this influenced upper-class women to support legislation protecting them, or to denounce it.
62. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

## Chapter IV

63. A. N. Basu, "Role of Women in the Indian Freedom Struggle", in B.R. Nanda (ed.), *Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity* (Delhi, 1976), p. 80.
64. Sultan Jahan Begum, *An Account of My Life*, vol. II (Bombay, 1922), p. 150.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
66. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
67. *Ibid.*, pp. 265-8.
68. A. N. Basu, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
69. For details on how Bi Amman improved her literacy in Urdu, and pawned her jewelry to send her sons to English schools, Aligarh and then



Oxford University, see Afzal Iqbal (ed.), *My Life: A Fragment. An Autobiographical Sketch of Mohammad Ali* (Lahore, 1966) and Mushirul Hasan, *Mohamed Ali: Ideology and Politics* (Delhi, 1981).

70. S. Husain, "Begum Rokeya", p. 6.
71. *Ibid.*
72. R. Jahan in R.S. Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, p. 42,
73. S. Husain, op. cit., p. 10.

## Chapter V

74. Rosalind Delmar, "What is Feminism?" in J. Mitchell and A. Oakley (eds.), *What is Feminism?* (Oxford, 1986), p. 8.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
77. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
79. *Ibid.*
80. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
81. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988), p. 28.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
83. *Ibid.*
84. See Reza Hammami and Martina Reiker, "Feminist Orientalism and Orientalist Marxism", in *New Left Review*, no. 170, July - August, 1988.
85. See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Placing Women's History in History", in *New Left Review*, no. 133, May - June 1982.

86. For a fuller explanation of her argument, see Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*, (London, 1985) and also her article "Femininity as Subversions: Reflections on the Muslim Concept of Nushuz", in Diana L. Eck and Devaki Jain (eds.), *Speaking of Faith* (London, 1986). Also see Fatma A. Sabbah, *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious* (New York, 1984).
87. See F. Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil*.
88. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
89. See F. Mernissi, "Femininity as Subversion".
90. F. Mernissi, op. cit.
91. Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (Middlesex, 1970), pp. 24-5.
92. Quotation by Spivak in Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Manchester, 1987), p. xviii.
93. F. Fanon, op. cit., pp. 21-49.



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